

## The New Freedom and the Old Slavery.

1

Church and its creed. Some of the Italian indeed, men of sincere piety, and did not hesitate to wield their pens in the cause of purifying it from gross abuses. Petrarch, Salutati, Vittorino, for instance, among the earlier humanists, Ficino and Mirandola among the later. In the case of many of the latter, however, the profession of adherence to the Church, as it was, was a mere pretence. They might be conventional Christians ; they were freethinkers in practice, who, like Cardinal Bembo, were pagans pure and simple in creed and life. Bembo, in fact, used to say that he refrained from reading St Paul's Epistles or his breviary for fear of spoiling his style. The result was a wide breach between profession and practice at the expense of honesty and earnestness. Honesty and earnestness were, in truth, not conspicuous qualities of the votaries of the later Italian Renaissance. Many of them were poor specimens of both humanity and morality. They were shameless libertines in their lives and their writings, and some of the most obscene rubbish ever printed was the product of their pens. It should not be forgotten, however, that libertinism was no reproach to a Christian in the age of a Sixtus IV. or an Alexander VI. The most awful parody of Christian morality was furnished by the papal court itself. The orthodoxy of such popes was, nevertheless, unimpeachable, and this kind of orthodoxy was still a force to which humanists had at least formally to pay tribute. If some of them, like Valla, honestly ventured to criticise the pretensions of the popes, or at a later period, like Galileo, assert scientific doctrines which the Church considered false or dangerous, they were speedily taught that the papal power was still a thing to be reckoned with. Despite such professions, whether enforced or conventional, it was certain that the modern freedom could not permanently continue thus to humour the old slavery. In the lands north of the Alps at any rate, as we shall see, the votaries of the new culture were more consistent and far less accommodating, and asserted their opinions despite all the power and prestige of tradition and convention.

Petrarch could count on many disciples in his own age, chief of whom were Boccaccio, who added to his mastery of Latin some knowledge of Greek, John of Ravenna, and